A new EU arrangement for the United Kingdom: European lessons from the February 19th agreement

By Catherine Mathieu and Henri Sterdyniak

Following the demand made by David Cameron on 10 November 2015 for a new arrangement for the United Kingdom in the European Union, the European Council came to an agreement at its meeting of 18 and 19 February. On the basis of this text, the British people will be called to the polls on 23 June to decide whether to stay in the EU. This episode raises a number of questions about the functioning of the EU.

– The United Kingdom has challenged European policy on matters that it deems crucial for itself and largely got what it wanted. Its firmness paid off. This has given rise to regrets on this side of the Channel. Why didn't France (and Italy) adopt a similar attitude in 2012, for instance, when Europe imposed the signing of the fiscal treaty and the implementation of austerity policies? This is a cause for concern: will what has been accepted for a big country be tolerated for a smaller one? The UK's threat to leave is credible because the EU has become very unpopular among the population (especially in England), and because the UK is independent financially (it borrows easily on the capital markets) and economically (it is a net contributor to the EU budget). A country that is more dependent on Europe would have little choice. This raises worries: won't we see other countries follow suit in the future? Will Europe be able to avoid becoming a Europe á la carte (each country taking part in the activities that interest it)? But is a model based on forced participation preferable? Europe must allow a country to abstain from policies that it deems harmful.

– The United Kingdom will therefore organize a referendum, which is satisfactory from a democratic perspective. The most recent referendums have hardly yielded favourable results for European construction (France and the Netherlands in 2005, Greece in July 2015, Denmark in December 2015). The British will be limited to choosing between leaving the EU (the February agreement clearly rejects the possibility of new renegotiations if the referendum results in a majority in favour of an EU exit) or staying with a reduced status; the possibility of the UK remaining in the EU and seeking to strengthen its social dimensions, as advocated by some of the Labour Party and the Scottish Nationalists, will not be offered. Too bad.

– The United Kingdom is explicitly exempted from the need to deepen the EMU or from an “ever closer union” or “deeper integration”, all formulas contained in the treaties. The proposed arrangement clarifies that these notions are not a legal basis to extend the competences of the EU. States that are not members of the euro zone retain the right to take part or not in further integration. This clarification is, in our opinion, welcome. It would not be legitimate for the Union’s powers to be extended continuously without the consent of the people. In the recent period, the five presidents and the EU Commission have proposed new steps towards European federalism: creating a European Fiscal Committee; establishing independent Competitiveness Councils; conditioning the granting of Structural Funds on fiscal discipline; implementing structural reforms; creating a European Treasury department; moving towards a financial union; and partially unifying the unemployment insurance systems. These moves would strengthen the technocratic bodies to the detriment of democratically elected governments. Wouldn’t it be necessary to explicitly request and obtain the agreement of the peoples before embarking on such a path?

– The exit of the United Kingdom, a certain distancing by some Central and Eastern Europe countries (Poland, Hungary), plus the reluctance of Denmark and Sweden could push towards an explicit move to a two-tier Union, or even, to take David Cameron's formulation, to an EU in which countries are heading to different destinations. The countries of the euro zone would for their part accept new transfers of sovereignty and would build a stronger fiscal and political union. In our opinion this proposal should be submitted to the people.

– At the same time, the draft agreement provides that the Eurogroup has no legislative power, which remains in the hands of the Council as a whole. The UK has had it clarified that a non-member state of the euro zone could ask the European Council to take up a decision on the euro zone or the banking union that it believes harms its interests. The principle of the euro zone's autonomy has thus not been proclaimed.

– The United Kingdom has had it clarified that it is not required to contribute financially to bail out the euro zone or the financial institutions of the banking union. This may be considered discomforting vis-à-vis the European principle of solidarity, but it is understandable. This is because the establishment of the euro zone has abolished the principle: "Every sovereign country is fully backed by a central bank, a lender of last resort", which is posed by the bailout problem. The UK (and its banks) are backed by the Bank of England.

– The United Kingdom has had the principles of subsidiarity reviewed. A new provision states that parliaments representing 55% of the Member States may challenge a law that does not respect this principle. The UK has had it noted that the issues of justice, security, and liberty remain under national competence. It is a pity that countries devoted to their specific social systems and their wage bargaining systems have not done the same.

– It is understandable that countries concerned about national sovereignty are annoyed (if not more) by the EU's relentless intrusions into areas under national jurisdiction, where Europe's intervention does not bring added value. It is understandable that these countries are refusing to have to incessantly justify to Brussels their economic policies or their economic, social or legal regulations when these have no impact on other Member States. Europe must undoubtedly take these feelings of exasperation into account.

– As regards the banking union, the draft text is deliberately confusing. It is recalled that the "single rule book" managed by the European Banking Agency (EBA) applies to all banks in the EU, and that financial stability and equal competitive conditions must be guaranteed. But at the same time, it says that Member States that do not participate in the banking union retain responsibility for their banking systems and can apply special provisions. Moreover, countries that are not members of the euro zone have a right of veto on the EBA. This raises the question of the very content of the banking union. Will it make it possible to take the measures needed to reduce the scale of speculative financial activity in Europe and steer the banks towards financing the real economy? Or is the objective to liberalize the markets for the development of financial activity in Europe so as to compete with London and non-European financial centres? In the first case, what was needed was to clearly take in hand the market in London, telling it that membership in the EU requires close monitoring of financial activities. And that its departure would allow the EU to take capital control measures to limit speculative activities and encourage banks in the euro zone to repatriate their activities.

– Likewise, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Ireland would have needed to be told that EU membership means the end of tax avoidance schemes for the multinationals.

– The United Kingdom has had a declaration passed affirming the need both to improve regulations and repeal unnecessary provisions to improve competitiveness while at the same time maintaining high standards of protection for consumers, labour, health and the environment. This compatibility undoubtedly amounts to wishful thinking.

– The text recognizes that the disparity in wage levels and social protection in European countries is hardly compatible with the principle of the free movement of persons in Europe. This has long been an unspoken part of European construction. The United Kingdom, which was one of the only countries not to take interim measures to restrict the entry of foreign workers at the time of the accession of central and eastern European countries in 2004, is now demanding that such measures be provided for in any future accessions. The draft agreement states that a European person’s stay in a country other than his or her own is not the responsibility of the host country, meaning that the person either must have sufficient resources or must work.

– The question of the right to family benefits when children are not living in the same country as their parents is a tangled web. In most countries, family benefits are universal (not dependent on parental contributions). Both principles cannot be met at the same time: that all children living in a country are entitled to the same benefit; and that everyone working in a given country is entitled to the same benefits. The United Kingdom has won the right to be able to reduce these allowances based on the standard of living and family benefits in the child’s country of residence. But fortunately this right cannot be extended to pension benefits.

– Most European countries currently have mechanisms to promote the employment of unskilled workers. Thanks to exemptions on social contribution, to tax credits and to specific benefits (like in-work credits or housing benefits in France), the income that they receive is largely disconnected from their wage costs. The British example shows that these programmes can become problematic in case of the free movement of workers. How does a country encourage its own citizens to work without attracting too many foreign workers? Here is another of the unspoken issues of open borders. It is paradoxical that it is the United Kingdom that is raising the question, while it is near full employment and is claiming that the flexibility of its labour market allows it to easily take in foreign workers. In any case, the UK was granted that a country facing an exceptional influx of workers from other EU Member States can obtain the right from the Council, for seven years, to grant non-contributory aid to new workers from other member countries in a graduated process over a period of up to four years from the start of their employment. The UK has also had it clarified that it can use this right immediately. This is a challenge to European citizenship, but this concept had already been chipped away for the inactive and unemployed.

The European Union, as currently constructed, poses many problems. The Member States have divergent interests and views. Because of differences in their national situations (the single monetary policy, freedom of movement of capital and people), many arrangements are problematic. Rules without an economic foundation have been introduced into fiscal policy. In many countries, the ruling classes, the political leaders, and the top officials have chosen to minimize these problems so as not to upset European construction. Crucial issues concerning the harmonization of taxes, social conditions, wages and regulations have been deliberately forgotten.

The UK has always chosen to keep its distance from European integration, safeguarding its sovereignty. Today it is putting its finger on sensitive points. To rejoice at its departure would be irrelevant. To use this to move mindlessly towards an “ever closer union” would be dangerous. Europe should seize this crisis to acknowledge that it has to live with a contradiction: national sovereignty must be respected as much as possible; Europe has no meaning in and of itself, but only if it implements a project that supports a specific model of society, adapting it to integrate the ecological transition, to eradicate poverty and mass unemployment, and to solve European imbalances in a concerted and united manner. If the agreement negotiated by the British could contribute to this, it would be a good thing – but will Europe's countries have the courage to do so?

Unemployment: an ambiguous fall, but an unambiguous rise in long-term jobless

Analysis and Forecasting Department (France team)

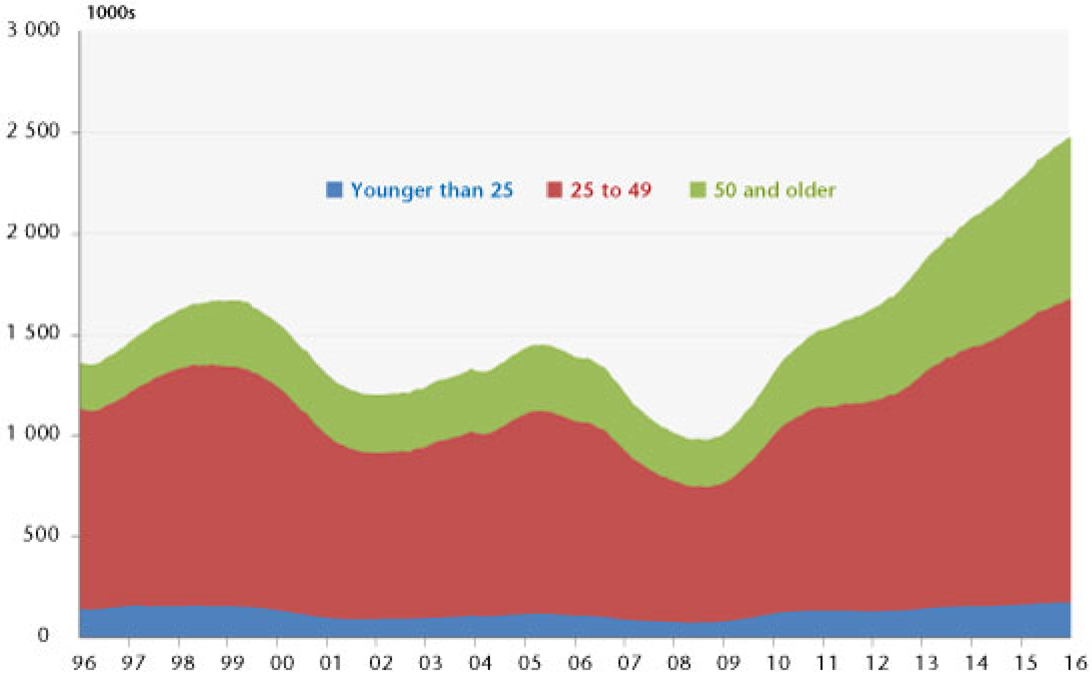
The unemployment figures for the month of January 2016 published by France's Pôle Emploi job centre show a fall of 27,900 in the number of job seekers who are not working (category A), which follows an increase recorded in the month of December (+15,800). While this fall might seem encouraging (a decline of this magnitude has not been seen since 2007), it must be qualified. First, recent changes in administrative practices made by Pôle Emploi [1] have resulted in an abnormal increase in exits from the jobless rolls due to failures to update (239,000, against a monthly average of 207,000 in 2015). Second, the high volatility of the monthly figures in recent months is a sign of a labour market in which job creation is insufficient to reduce unemployment on a sustainable basis.

It is true that the increase in the numbers exiting the job centre due to regaining work (+ 5.1% over three months) is a positive sign, suggesting that the expected recovery is underway. Nevertheless, even though a pickup in employment has occurred, it has not been strong enough to halt the steady rise in the number of long-term unemployed (+9.1% in one year). Thus, in a context of near-zero average growth since 2008 and a continuing deterioration in the labour market, the share of the unemployed registered for a year or more in categories A, B or C has increased since mid-2009 (by 31% approximately) and is now at a historical high, representing 45.4% of all jobseekers in categories A, B or C (Figure 1).

This increase is explained by the rise in unemployment among older workers (+ 8.9% yoy): the implementation of a series of pension reforms (2003, 2010), coupled with the elimination of job search waivers for seniors, has led to prolonging the working life and to a later retirement age. In a context of weak growth, the increase in the employment rate of older workers has been insufficient to absorb the growth in the working population in this age group, with a consequent rise in unemployment among those over age 50 (see La suppression de la Dispense de recherche d'emploi: quand les gouvernements augmentent volontairement le décompte des chômeurs ! [The elimination of job search waivers: when governments voluntarily increase the unemployment count – *in French]*.

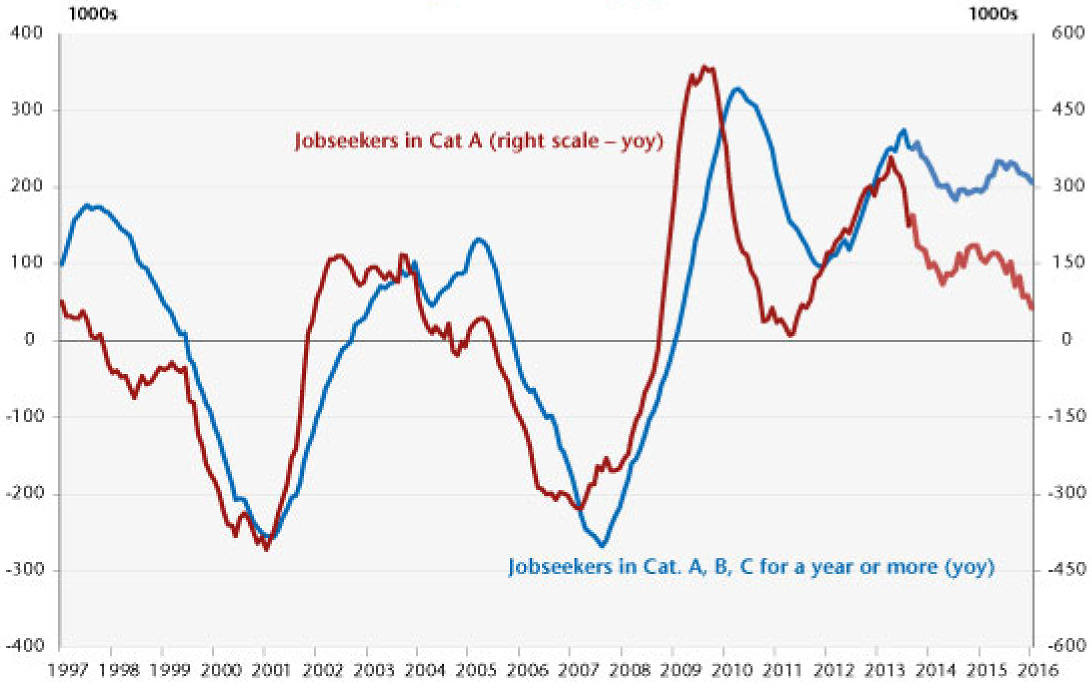
The relative improvement in the labour market expected in the coming months would stem from a slight improvement in growth and from the implementation of a training plan for the unemployed, announced by President François Hollande in late December 2015. However, it will take a long time for this improvement to affect the long-term unemployed. Indeed, the time taken for a fall in the numbers of Category A jobless to be transmitted to the long-term unemployed is relatively long (Figure 2). In the late 2000s, a period that saw a significant drop in jobless numbers, it took almost a year and a half for the fall in Category A jobless to result in a significant drop in the number of the long-term unemployed. The mechanisms for a pickup in jobs are clearly subject to considerable inertia.

Figure 1. Jobseekers recorded for a year or more in Category A, B or C, based on age



Sources: Pôle Emploi job center; Dares; OFCE calculations.

Figure 2. Jobseekers registered in Categories A, B or C for a year or more and jobseekers registered in Category A



Sources: Pôle Emploi job center; Dares; OFCE calculations.

[1] Because of this change in methodology, the unemployed have had one day less to complete their updates, leading in practice to a significant increase in the number of those

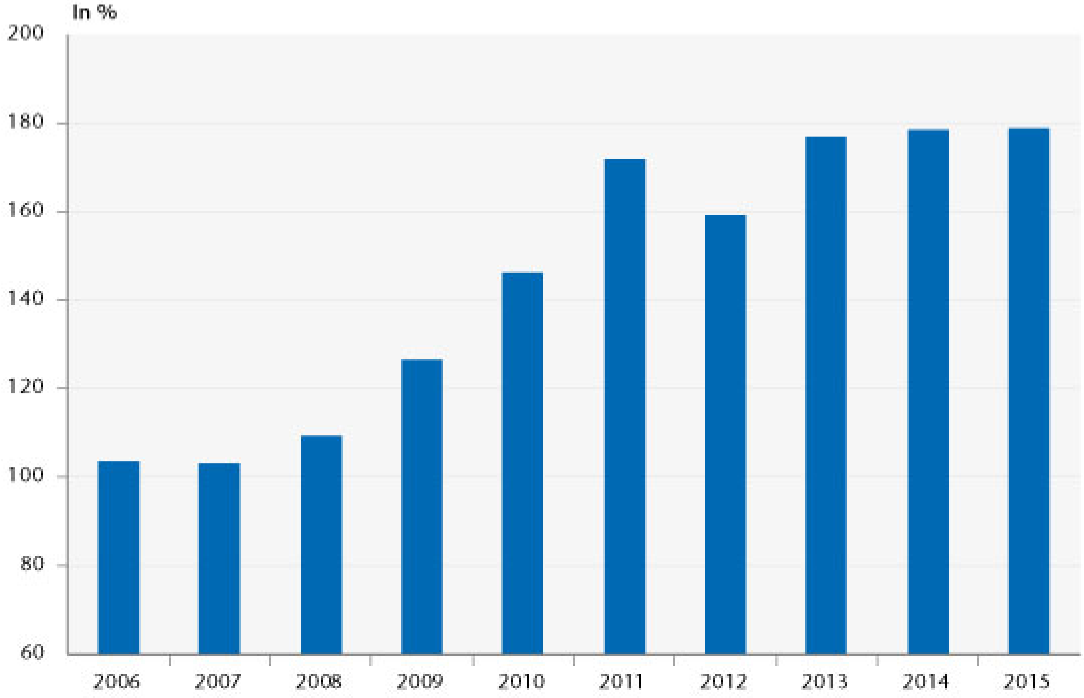
struck off due to a failure to update (+1.5% in three months).

Why can’t Greece get out of debt?

By Sébastien Villemot

Between 2007 and 2015, Greece’s public debt rose from 103% to 179% [1] of its GDP (see chart below). The debt-to-GDP ratio rose at an uninterrupted pace, except for a 12-point fall in 2012 following the restructuring imposed on private creditors, and despite the implementation of two macroeconomic adjustment programs (and the beginning of a third) that were aimed precisely at redressing the Greek government’s accounts. Austerity has plunged the country into a recessionary and deflationary spiral, making it difficult if not impossible to reduce the debt. The question of a further restructuring is now sharply posed.

Figure 1. Greece's public debt as % of GDP, 2006-2015



Sources: Eurostat, European Commission..

What explains this failure? How much have the various factors involved (public deficit, austerity, deflation, restructuring, bank recapitalization, etc.) contributed to changes in the debt? To provide some answers, we conducted an accounting breakdown of the changes in the debt ratio: the result is given in the graph below for the period 2007-2015.

Figure 2. Accounting breakdown of changes in the debt ratio

Sources: Eurostat, European Commission, author's calculations.

Several phases, which correspond to various developments in the Greek crisis, are clearly identifiable on the chart.

In 2007, prior to the financial storm, the GDP-to-debt ratio was stable: the negative effect of the budget deficit (including interest), which increases the ratio's numerator, was offset by the positive impact of growth and inflation, which increase the denominator. So the situation was stable, at least temporarily, even though the debt level was already high (103% of GDP, which also explains the significant interest burden).

This stability was upset with the onset of the global financial crisis in 2008 and 2009: growth disappeared and even entered negative territory, while the primary deficit was rising, partly due to the "automatic stabilizers", and by 2009 came to 10 percentage points of GDP.

Given the intensity of the fiscal crisis, an initial adjustment plan was implemented in 2010. As the austerity measures began to bite, the primary deficit began to fall (to almost zero in 2012, excluding extraordinary expenses). But austerity also resulted in intensifying the recession: in 2011, growth (very negative) contributed nearly 15 GDP points to the increase in debt. Austerity also led to reducing inflation, which dropped to almost zero, and which is therefore no longer playing its natural role of cushioning debt. Meanwhile, the interest burden remained high (rising to 7.2 GDP points in 2011).

It should be recalled that the accounting breakdown presented here tends to underestimate the negative impact of growth and to overestimate the impact of the budget deficit. Indeed, a recession generates a cyclical deficit, through the automatic stabilizers, and therefore indirectly contributes to debt through the channel of the budget balance. However, to identify the structural and cyclical components of the budget deficit, an estimate of potential growth is needed. In the Greek case, given the depth of the crisis, this exercise is quite challenging, and the few estimates available diverge considerably; for this reason, we preferred to stick to a purely accounting approach.

2012 was a year for big manoeuvres, with two successive debt restructurings in March and December. On paper, there was a substantial cancellation of debt (measured in terms of the stock-flow adjustment): almost 60 GDP points. But what should have been a significant reduction was largely offset by opposing forces. The recession remained exceptionally intense and accounted for 13.5 GDP points of the increase in debt. Above all, the main negative effect came from bank recapitalizations, which were necessitated by the writing off of public debt securities, which were largely held by domestic banks. In accounting terms, these recapitalisations take two forms: grants to banks (recorded as extraordinary expenses) or purchases of newly issued shares (recorded as purchases of financial assets) [2], which is why these two categories are grouped on the graphic. The category of purchases of financial assets also recognizes the establishment of a financial cushion to finance future bank recapitalizations [3].

In 2013, the debt-to-GDP ratio once again rose sharply, even though the primary balance (excluding exceptional expenses) showed a surplus. Bank recapitalizations (19 billion euros) were a heavy burden and were only partially covered by the sale of financial assets. The recession, although less intense, and deflation, now well established, made the picture even gloomier.

In 2014 and 2015, the situation improved, but without leading to any decline in the debt-to-GDP ratio, even though the primary deficit excluding exceptional spending was almost zero. Deflation persisted, while growth failed to restart (the 2014 upturn was moderate and short-lived), and the banks had to be recapitalized again in 2015 (for 5 billion euros). The interest burden remained high, despite the decision of the European creditors to lower rates on the loans from the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF): several years would be needed before this shows up in the effective interest burden. Only the sales of financial assets made it possible to hold down the increase in debt, which is clearly not sustainable in the long run since there is a limited stock of these assets.

The table below shows the cumulative contribution of each factor for the period as a whole, and for the sub-period during which Greece was under programme (2010-2015).

Cumulative contribution of each factor

	2007-2015	2010-2015
Growth	41.7	39.7
Inflation	-1.8	8.7
Primary deficit excl. exceptional expenditure	23.9	6.2
Interest	44.7	30.3
Exceptional expenditure & purchase of fin. assets	25.7	22.1
Debt restructuring (& other stock-flow adjustments)	-58.7	-54.6
Total	**75.4**	**52.4**

Sources: Eurostat, European Commission, author's calculations..

The two main contributors to the increase in debt are growth (negative) and the cost of interest. In other words, the total increase in debt is due primarily to a "snowball effect", which means the automatic increase due to the differential between the real interest rate and growth (the infamous "r-g"). The debt forgiveness in 2012 was not even sufficient to offset the snowball effect accumulated over the period. The bank recapitalizations that became necessary due in particular to the cancellation of debt were a heavy burden. The primary deficit, which is under the more direct control of the Greek government, comes only in 4th position from 2007 to 2015 (and doesn't contribute much at all over the period 2010-2015).

It is therefore clear that the sharp rise in the debt-to-GDP ratio since 2007 (and especially since 2010) was not primarily the result of the Greek government's fiscal irresponsibility, but resulted instead from an erroneous consolidation strategy that was based on a logic of accounting austerity and not on coherent macroeconomic reasoning. An upturn in growth and inflation will be necessary to achieve any substantial debt reduction. But the new austerity measures set out in the third adjustment plan could cause a return to recession, while the constraints of price competitiveness within the euro zone make it impossible to foresee any renewal of inflation. A significant reduction of debt that is not conditional on a new destructive phase of austerity would allow a fresh start; in a previous study[4], we showed that a restructuring that cut Greece’s debt to 100% of its GDP would correspond to a sustainable scenario. However, Europe’s member states, which are now Greece’s main creditors, are currently rejecting such a scenario. The path to reducing Greek debt now looks more uncertain than ever…

[1] The data for 2015 are not yet fully available. The figures quoted for this year are projections by the European Commission published on 4 February 2016.

[2] These holdings in bank capital are recorded here at their purchase value. Any subsequent deterioration in these holdings is not reflected in the chart, because this would not lead to a further increase in the gross debt (although it would increase the net debt).

[3] In 2012, Greece bought 41 billion euros worth of EFSF bonds. Of this total, 6.5 billion were immediately given to the Bank of Piraeus, while 24 billion were lent to 4 big banks (which benefited from partial cancellation of their debt in 2013 against equity participations by the Greek State for a lesser value). The remaining 10 billion were returned unused by Greece to the EFSF in 2015, following the agreement of the Eurogroup on 22 February.

[4] See Céline Antonin, Raul Sampognaro, Xavier Timbeau and Sébastien Villemot, 2015, “La Grèce sur la corde raide” [Greece on the tightrope], *Revue de l’OFCE*, no. 138.

Is missing disinflation a uniquely American phenomenon?

By Paul Hubert, Mathilde Le Moigne

Are the dynamics of inflation after the 2007-2009 crisis atypical? According to Paul Krugman, "If inflation had responded to the Great Recession and aftermath the way it did in previous big slumps, we would be deep in deflation by now; we aren't." In fact, after 2009, inflation in the US has remained surprisingly stable in terms of changes in real activity. This phenomenon has been called "missing disinflation". Can a phenomenon like this be seen in the euro zone?

Despite the worst recession since the 1929 crisis, the inflation rate has remained stable at around 1.5% on average between 2008 and 2011 in the US and 1% in the euro zone. Does this mean that the Phillips curve, which links inflation to real activity, has lost its empirical validity? In a note in 2016, Olivier Blanchard argued instead that the Phillips curve, in its simplest original version, is still a valid instrument for understanding the relationship between inflation and unemployment, in spite of this "missing disinflation".

Blanchard nevertheless noted that the relationship between the two variables has weakened, because inflation increasingly depends on inflation expectations, which are themselves anchored to the inflation target of the US Fed. In an article in 2015, Coibion and Gorodnichenko explained this missing disinflation in the US by the fact that inflation expectations are influenced by variations in the most visible prices, such as fluctuations in the price of oil. Furthermore, since 2015 inflation expectations have declined concomitantly with oil prices.

The difficulty of accounting for recent trends in inflation through the Phillips curve led us to evaluate its potential determinants in a [recent working paper] and to consider whether this "missing disinflation" phenomenon was also present in the euro zone. Based on a standard Phillips curve, we did not come up with the results of Coibion and Gorodnichenko when the euro zone was considered in its entirety. In other words, real activity and inflation expectations do describe changes in inflation.

However, this result appears to come from an aggregation bias between the behaviours of national inflation within the euro zone. In particular, we found a significant divergence between the countries of Northern Europe (Germany, France), which demonstrate a general tendency towards *missing inflation*, and countries on the periphery (Spain, Italy, Greece), which exhibit periods of *missing disinflation*. This divergence nevertheless appears right from the start of our sample, that is to say, in the early years of the creation of the euro zone, and seems to reverse around 2006, without any significant change during the crisis of 2008-2009.

Unlike what happened in the US, it appears that the euro zone has not experienced missing disinflation as a result of the economic and financial crisis of 2008-2009. It seems instead that divergences in inflation in Europe preceded the crisis, and tended to subside with the crisis.

Measuring well-being and

sustainability: A special issue of the Revue de l'OFCE

By Eloi Laurent

This issue of the *Revue de l'OFCE (no. 145, February 2016)* presents some of the best works that are being produced at a rapid clip on indicators of well-being and sustainability.

Why want to measure well-being? Because the idea that economic growth represents human development, in the sense that growth represents a good summary of its various dimensions, is simply false. GDP growth is not a prerequisite for human development; on the contrary, it is now often an impediment (as is illustrated by the exorbitant health costs of air pollution in India and China, two countries that concentrate one-third of the human population).

Achieving growth is not therefore sufficient in itself for human development; there is a need for specific policies that deal directly with education, health, environmental conditions and democratic quality. If the multiple dimensions of well-being are not taken into account, one dimension, typically the economic dimension, is imposed on and crushes the others, mutilating the human development of both individuals and groups (the example of health in the United States is particularly striking in this regard).

Why want to measure sustainability? Because today's global growth rate of 5% is of little importance if the climate, the ecosystems, the water and air that underpin our well-being have irrevocably deteriorated in two or three decades due to the means deployed to achieve that growth. Or to put it in the words of the Chinese Minister of the Environment, Zhou Shengxian, in 2011: "If our land is ravaged and our health destroyed, what benefit does our growth bring?" We need to update our understanding of well-being so that it is not a mirage. Our economic and political systems exist only because they are underpinned by a set of resources that make up the biosphere, whose vitality is the condition for the perpetuation of these systems. To put it bluntly, if ecological crises are not measured and controlled, they will eventually do away with human welfare.

Indicators of well-being and sustainability must therefore enter a new, performative age: after measuring in order to understand, we now need to measure in order to make change – to evaluate in order to evolve. Because the change called for by these new visions of the global economy is considerable. This time of action invariably involves choices and trade-offs that are far from simple. This underscores the dual purpose of this issue of the *Revue de l'OFCE*: to show that indicators of well-being and sustainability have reached maturity and that they now can change not only our vision of the economic world but also the economic world itself; they can make clear the types of choices available to public and private decision-makers so as to carry out the change needed. In this respect the two sections of this special issue clearly highlight the issue of the relevant scale for measuring well-being and sustainability.

The first part of this issue is devoted to the relatively new topic of measuring regional well-being in France. Measuring well-being where it is actually lived presupposes moving down the scale to the local level: the need to measure and improve human well-being as close as possible to people's lived reality, along with the scale of spatial inequalities in contemporary France, demands a territorial perspective. There are at least two good reasons why territories (regions, cities, *départements*, towns), more than nation-states, are the vectors of choice for the transition towards well-being and sustainability. The first is that they have grown in importance due to the impact of globalization and urbanization. The second is their capacity for social innovation. Following on from the late Elinor Ostrom, we talk about a “polycentric transition” to mean that each level of government can seize on the well-being and sustainability transition without waiting for a push from the top.

Monica Brezzi Luiz de Mello and Eloi Laurent (“Beyond GDP, beneath GDP: Measuring regional well-being in the OECD” – *all* OFCE Revue *articles in French*) gives the initial results of the theoretical and empirical work currently underway in the OECD framework (interactive access on the site http://www.oecdregionalwellbeing.org/) that measures certain dimensions of well-being at the regional level and applies these new indicators to the French case in order to draw useful lessons for public policy.

Robert Reynard (“Quality of life in the French regions”) provides an overview of recent findings by the INSEE using regional quality-of-life indicators. These can be used to develop a new typology of French spaces, highlighting eight major types of territories, which are distinguished both by the living conditions of their inhabitants (employment, income, health, education, etc.) and the amenities that these areas provide for their people (living environment, access to services, transport, etc.). The new representation of France that emerges constitutes a valuable decision-making tool for those in charge of policies aimed at promoting equality between the regions.

Kim Antunez, Louise Haran and Vivien Roussez (“Diagnoses of quality of life: Taking into account people’s preferences”) looks back at the approach developed by France’s regional monitoring body (*Observatoire des territoires*) and highlights indicators, offered at appropriate geographical scales, that can be used to account for the multidimensional character of quality of life in France. Here too, regional typologies explore the link between the diverse amenities in people’s environments and the diverse aspirations of the people who live in them, so as to highlight the imbalances that exist and the public policy levers that can be used to reduce these.

Finally, Florence Jany-Catrice ("Measuring regional well-being: Working *on* or *with* the regions?") discusses a fundamental aspect of the debate about measuring well-being in the French regions: the participation of citizens in defining their own well-being. She shows in particular that the impact of the indicators depends on whether those who develop them work on the regions or with them – it is only in the latter case that the region and its inhabitants become active players in the development of a common vision.

But, in contrast to these localized approaches, the measurement of sustainability requires moving up the geographical scale to the national or even global level. This is the subject of the articles in the second part of this issue, which deal with a subject whose importance has been emphasized by the recent law on the energy transition: the circular economy. Here there is a crucial difference to be made between a seemingly circular economy, which concerns a product or business, and genuine economic circularity, which can be understood only by enlarging the loop to develop a systemic vision.

This is what Christian Arnsperger and Dominique Bourg aim to demonstrate ("Towards a truly circular economy: Reflections on the foundations of an indicator of circularity") by examining the main issues and questions that designers of an indicator of a truly circular economy would need to take into account, if it were ever to be developed formally and technically. They conclude in particular that without a systemic vision oriented towards the reduction, rationing and stationarity intrinsic to the permaculture approach, the notion of the circular economy will forever remain vulnerable to misuse that, however well intentioned, is ultimately short-sighted.

Vincent Aurez and Laurent Georgeault ("Indicators of the circular economy in China”) attempt to assess the relevance and the actual scope of the assessment tools developed in recent years by China to flesh out an integrated circular economy policy that aims at ensuring the transition to a low-carbon model with a restrained use of resources. These instruments, which in many respects are unique, but still inadequate, are distinguished by their systemic and multidimensional character, and therefore constitute an original contribution to the field of sustainability indicators.

Finally, Stephan Kampelmann (“Measuring the circular economy at the regional level: A systemic analysis of the management of organic matter in Brussels”) draws on the theory of social-ecological systems to carry out a particularly innovative exercise. He uses a battery of indicators to compare the economic, social and environmental impact of two possible pathways for the municipal management of flows of organic matter in Brussels: a centralized treatment using anaerobic digestion, and a process based on decentralized composting.

Thus while well-being is best measured at the local level, to assess sustainability properly, including at the regional level, the impact felt beyond local and national borders has to be taken into account. The trade-offs between these dimensions, including the exploration and possible transformation into synergies at regional and national levels, then turn out to be the most promising projects opened up by the welfare and sustainability transition.

The secular stagnation equilibrium

By Gilles Le Garrec et Vincent Touzé

The economic state of slow growth and underemployment, coupled with low inflation or even deflation, has recently been widely discussed, in particular by Larry Summers, under the label of "secular stagnation". The hypothesis of secular stagnation was expressed for the first time in 1938 in a speech by A. Hansen, which was finally published in 1939. Hansen was worried about insufficient investment and a declining population in the United States, following a long period of strong economic and demographic growth.

In a *Note by the OFCE (*no. 57 dated 26 January 2016 [in French]*),* we studied the characteristics and dynamics of a secular stagnation equilibrium.

A state of secular stagnation results when an abundance of savings relative to demand for credit pushes the "natural" real interest rate (what is compatible with full employment) below zero. But if the real interest rate permanently remains above the natural rate, then the result is a chronic shortage of aggregate demand and investment, with a weakened growth potential.

To counter secular stagnation, the monetary authorities first reduced their policy rates, and then, having reached the zero lower bound (ZLB), they implemented non-conventional policies called quantitative easing. The central banks cannot really force interest rates to be very negative, otherwise private agents would have an interest in keeping their savings in the form of banknotes. Beyond quantitative easing, what other policies might potentially help pull the economy out of secular stagnation?

To answer this crucial question, the model developed by Eggertsson and Mehrotra in 2014 has the great merit of clarifying the mechanisms behind a fall into long-term stagnation, and it is helping macroeconomic analysis to update its understanding of the multiplicity of equilibria and the persistence of the crisis. Their model is based on the consumption and savings behaviour of agents with a finite lifespan in a context of a rationed credit market and nominal wage rigidity. As for the monetary policy conducted by the central bank, this is set at a nominal rate using a Taylor rule.

According to this approach, secular stagnation was initiated by the 2008 economic and financial crisis. This crisis was linked to high household debt, which ultimately led to credit rationing. In this context, credit rationing leads to a fall in demand and excess savings. Consequently, the real interest rate falls. In a situation of full employment, if credit tightens sharply, the equilibrium interest rate becomes negative, which leaves conventional monetary policy toothless. In this case, the economy plunges into a lasting state of underemployment of labour, characterised by output that is below potential and by deflation.

In the model proposed by Eggertsson and Mehrotra, there is no capital accumulation. As a result, the underlying dynamic is characterized by adjustments without transition from one steady state to another (from full employment to secular stagnation if there's a credit crisis, and vice versa if credit doesn't tighten much).

To extend the analysis, we considered the accumulation of physical capital as a prerequisite to any productive activity (Le Garrec and Touzé, 2015.). This highlights an asymmetry in the dynamics of secular stagnation. If the credit constraint is loosened, then capital converges on its pre-crisis level. However, exiting the crisis takes longer than entering it. This property suggests that economic policies used to fight against secular stagnation must be undertaken as soon as possible.

There are a number of lessons offered by this approach:

- To avoid the ZLB, there is an urgent need to create inflation while avoiding speculative asset “bubbles”, which could require special regulation. The existence of a deflationary equilibrium thus raises the question of the appropriateness of monetary policy rules that are overly focused on inflation.
- One should be wary of the deflationary effects of policies to boost potential output. The right policy mix is to support structural policies with a sufficiently accommodative monetary policy.
- Cutting savings to raise the real interest rate (e.g. by facilitating debt) is an interesting possibility, but the negative impact on potential GDP should not be overlooked. There is a clear trade-off between exiting secular stagnation and depressing potential GDP. One interesting solution could be to finance infrastructure, education or R&D (higher productivity) through government borrowing (raising the real equilibrium interest rate). Indeed, an aggressive investment policy (public or private) funded so as to push up the natural interest rate can meet a dual objective: to support aggregate demand and to develop the productive potential.

How do French people look at equality of opportunity?

By Michel Forsé (CNRS) and Maxime Parodi

Do the French people believe in equal opportunity? The Dynegal survey asked the question in 2013 to a representative sample of 4,000 individuals, whose responses were very mixed. In a recent article in the *Revue de l'OFCE* (no. 146, 2016 [in French]), we show that it is the middle classes who prove to be a little more convinced than others by the idea that schooling gives everyone a chance and that one's success in life does not depend on social origin. This result is in line with the thesis by Simmel that makes the middle-class the site of social mobility.

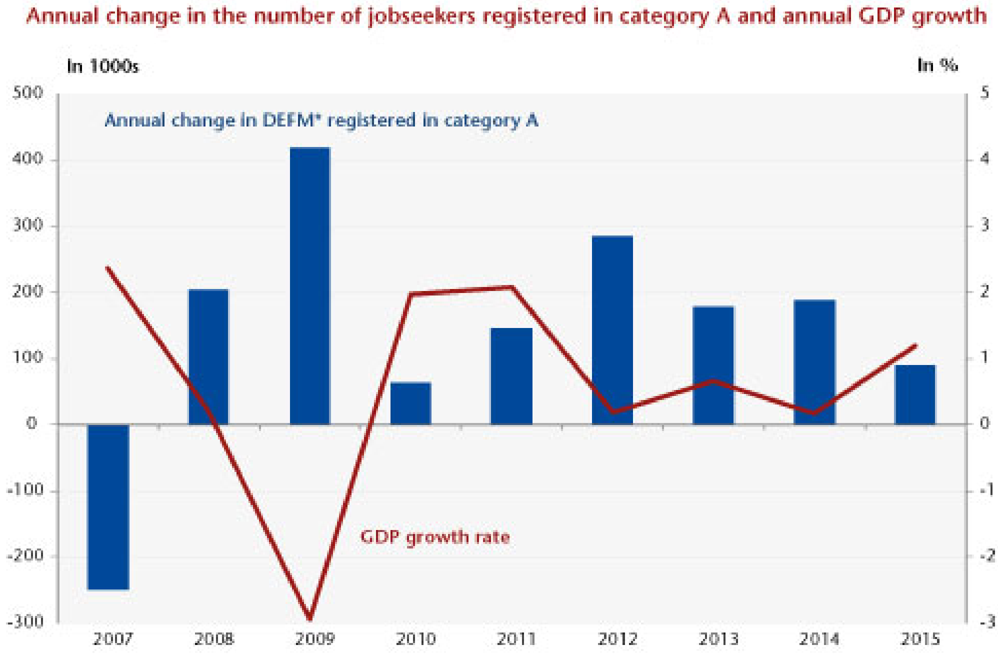
The survey also raises questions about the link between the belief in equal opportunity and social expectations in terms of recognition of merit and equality of results. As might be expected, the less one believes in equality of opportunity, the less one defends the recognition of merit, and the greater the demand for equality of results. On the other hand, French people who are perfectly convinced that everyone has the same chance of success defend not only the recognition of merit, but also equality of place. This unexpected result highlights, in fact, a risk inherent in a society that is conceived of as totally meritocratic: the risk of completely discrediting the losers and of not finding them a place in society.

2015: An eighth year of rising unemployment in France

Department of Analysis and Forecasting (France Team)

Since June 2015, the number of job seekers at the end of the month (the number of “DEFM”, in French) in Category A registered with Pôle Emploi has swung from month to month, rising and falling. This high volatility, which reflects a sluggish labour market in which there is insufficient job creation to make a long-term reduction in unemployment, is directly related to the sluggish growth in the French economy overall. So after a relatively favourable November 2015 (15,000 DEFM fewer in category A), December once again saw an increase in the number of unemployed (+15,800), offsetting the previous month’s fall. In addition, for the first time since May 2015, all age groups experienced an increase in the number of category A DEFM in December.

Ultimately, the number of jobseekers registered in category A with the Pôle Emploi job center increased for the eighth consecutive year in metropolitan France. With the return of higher growth, this increase has nevertheless been less than in previous years: +90,000 in 2015, versus +200,000 on average between 2011 and 2014. The increase has massively affected job seekers aged 50 and over (+69,000 in 2015), while the numbers under age 25 were down (22,000 fewer in 2015).



* Jobseekers enrolled at end of month.
Sources: Pôle Emploi, Dares, Insee, OFCE calculations.

The implementation of successive pension reforms (2003, 2010), coupled with the elimination of exemptions on job-seeking by seniors, has led to a longer duration of economic activity and to putting off the age of retirement. In a context of weak growth, the rise in the employment rate for seniors has been insufficient to absorb the increase in the workforce for that age group, with a consequent increase in unemployment of those over age 50.

The decreasing number of unemployed young people is due to two main factors. First, the employment policies enacted since 2013 have targeted youth in particular through the Jobs of the future (*emplois d'avenir*) programme. Second, the low job creation in the market sector is mainly taking the form of temporary jobs (fixed-term CDD contracts, temping), a type of employment in which young people are heavily represented (34.2% of young people in employment are on CDD contracts or temping versus 8.4% for other age groups). This development can be compared to the observed increase in categories B and C (+170,000 in 2015 against 97,000 on average between 2011 and 2014). Thus, while some return to work has been observed, this has not resulted in exits from unemployment as measured by the job center, and has not led to halting the continuing rise in the number of long-term unemployed (+9.5% in a year).

The year 2015 therefore did not see a reversal in the unemployment curve. Recall that it takes a GDP growth rate of over 1.4% to create enough jobs to begin to roll back unemployment, and only an extended return to growth over that threshold would be sufficient to lead to a sustained drop in the number of category A jobseekers enrolled in the job center.

Intergenerational inequality in four large EU countries: Does one model fit all?

Francesco Vona

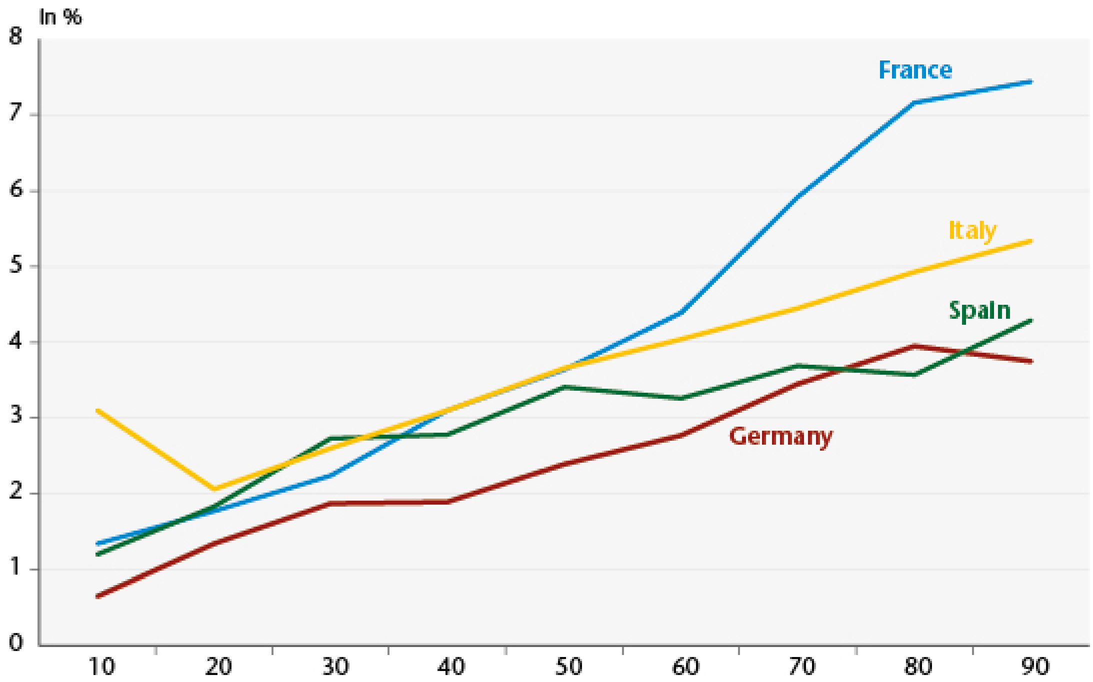
The extent to which social mobility differ across countries is subject of much debate in political and academic circles. The two poles of the relatively egalitarian Scandinavian countries and the relatively unequal Anglo-Saxon ones have been taken as key examples to corroborate a simple human capital-based explanation of cross-country differences in social mobility. In fact, stark differences in educational systems (e.g. private *vs*. public financing) and returns to skills well account for the gap in social mobility between Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon countries. However, in a recent paper using comparable individual data for these four countries (*i.e*. EUSILC), I show that this explanation does not suffice in accounting for differences in social mobility across the four largest EU economies: Germany, France, Italy and Spain.[1]

To gauge insight on the validity of the human capital story, we observe that worker's skills on which earnings depend are the result of two inputs: family background (including genetic transmission of intelligence if any) and individual abilities independent on family background. Our working hypothesis is that these two inputs are complements and thus that coming from a good family pays especially for talented individuals who not only don't face any spatial and financial constraint to access best schools but are also exposed to a more stimulating cultural environment (Cunha and Heckman, 2007). We test this hypothesis using regression techniques that allow to estimate returns to family background conditional on individual abilities (Firpo *et al.*, 2009). The figure below shows the effect of family background in correspondence of each decile of the son's earnings distribution, with a higher decile corresponding to higher individual abilities. The parental background coefficient should be interpreted as the percentage increase in earnings following a one-decile increase in the relative social position of the parents.[2]

At a first glance, our results lend to support to the hypothesis of a widespread background-ability complementarity. Returns to family background are higher at the top of the distribution not only in Germany and France, where parental influence on education is particularly important because of, respectively, the early tracking and the *grandes écoles system*, but also in the two Mediterranean countries, where usually non-meritocratic mechanisms are stronger.[3] However, one model does not fully fit all. First, the curve of returns to background is significantly steeper in the two central European countries than in the two Mediterranean countries, consistent with the idea that in Mediterranean countries family background affects children career prospects through social networks and nepotism.[4] Second, the effects of family background are significantly larger in France compared to the other three countries. While the extremely large effect in the top decile is broadly consistent with the parental influence on the probability of entering *grandes écoles* in France, large returns in the 7th and 8th decile indicate an increasingly polarized distribution of opportunities depending on family origins.[5]

This increasingly high social immobility correlated with children abilities questions the foundation of the French school system and cannot be accounted for by a simple private vs. public school argument. A possible explanation is residential segregation and thus a radical rethinking of school admission policy based on neighborhood of residence is needed. Targeted policies promoting the mixing of students from different socio-economic background in the same school appear in high need to allow the talented but disadvantaged children to benefit from the positive peer effect from the well-off ones. Recent policy experiments carried out in the US show that these policies are particularly effective in increasing the career prospective of disadvantaged students (see Chetty *et al*. 2015).

Figure: Effects of parental background along the income distribution



Note: in France, for children in the last decile of income, an increase of one decile of parental background increases children's income by 7,5%.
Source: EUSILC, 2011.

[1] See Raitano, M., Vittori, C., Vona, F., 2015, 'The effect of parental background along the sons' earnings distribution: does one model fit for all?', *OFCE working paper*, n° 2015-18 and *Applied Economic Letters*, forthcoming.We use the information provided by the 2011 EU-SILC wave that includes a specific section with information on family characteristics when the interviewed was around 14 years old.

[2] We build a comprehensive measure of family background combining various family characteristics (mainly educational and occupational attainments of the parents) to obtain a distribution of parental social positions and associate each child to a given social position ranked from one to ten for convenience.

[3] Note that the parental background coefficient is always statistically different from zero, apart from in the first decile in Germany and Spain.

[4] Raitano, M., Vona, F., (2015). "Measuring the link between intergenerational occupational mobility and earnings: evidence from eight European countries", *Journal of Economic Inequality*, vol. 13(1), 83-102.

[5] Note that in the previous wave of the EU-SILC survey on intergenerational mobility, France displayed lower intergenerational inequality than Italy, Spain and the UK.

The American dream (finally) proven?

By Maxime Parodi

In a recently published short article, Thomas Hirsch and Mark Rank (2015) give us some astonishing figures about American society – numbers that, taken seriously, would lead to a significantly more nuanced view of income inequality in the United States. Indeed, their study suggests that American society is much more fluid than we think. While Americans undoubtedly live in a very unequal society, most of them would experience wealth at some point in their lifetimes. There is, in reality, a high turnover between rich and poor, which would explain why Americans are not very critical of inequality.

According to this study, during their working lives (age 25 to 60), 69.8% of Americans have enjoyed at least one year of household income sufficient to be included among the richest 20%. And 53.1% of Americans have made it – for at least one year – into the richest 10%. An even more exclusive 11.1% of Americans have spent at least one year in the illustrious club of the wealthiest 1%.

But before accepting these outlandish figures, a more serious look needs to be taken of the study by Hirschl and Rank. It turns out that the numbers do not in fact offer a simple description of American society, but are rather the result of a modelling exercise. Behind these figures lie certain assumptions and methods that have been adopted, and which deserve discussion.

In the latest *Note de l'OFCE (no. 56 of 12 January 2015)*, I show that the assumptions made are unrealistic and that the method used does not support the presence of missing data in the biography of the respondents. All in all, the results are heavily biased in favour of the American dream. It is possible, however, to partially correct this bias, yielding the results in the table below.

Table. Cumulative percentage by age and averages, after correction for bias, of belonging at least once in one's life to the richest 20%, 10%, 5% or 1% of households

In %

H* age	Q20		Q10		Q5		Q1	
	Graduate	Non-Graduate	Graduate	Non-Graduate	Graduate	Non-Graduate	Graduate	Non-Graduate
25	7,6	3,4	4,1	1,4	2,4	0,7	0,4	0,1
30	19,1	8,6	10,8	3,8	6,1	1,8	1,0	0,2
35	27,6	12,7	17,2	6,1	10,2	3,0	2,4	0,6
40	33,1	15,5	22,6	8,2	14,5	4,3	4,0	0,9
45	37,2	17,6	26,9	9,9	18,4	5,6	5,4	1,3
50	39,6	18,9	30,8	11,5	21,7	6,6	6,6	1,6
55	41,0	19,7	33,2	12,5	24,3	7,5	7,9	1,9
60	41,3	19,8	34,4	13,0	25,6	7,9	8,7	2,1
Average	31		24		17		5	

Source : Author's calculations.

Basically, the Hirschl & Rank figures are cut in half! Thus, 31% of Americans will have a sufficient household income for at least one year (between age 25 and 60) to be among the richest 20%. And 5% of Americans will have a sufficient household income for one year to be in the richest 1%.

Given the magnitude of this correction, it is clear that the study by Hirschl and Rank distorts reality by suggesting that social destinies in the United States are very chaotic – as if the entire society were at the roulette table. Other articles by Hirschl and Rank further fill out the picture. It is not in fact the first time that these authors have come up with such figures using this method. In 2001, they examined the other end of the income distribution, evaluating the percentage of Americans who have experienced an episode of poverty during their lifetime (Hirschl and Rank, 2001). They again came up with striking figures. For example, 54% of Americans experienced an episode of poverty [1] before age 40. In 2005, they again applied this method to recipients of food stamps (food vouchers), and estimated that 50% of Americans will have made use of food stamps at least once in their lives (before age 65). This order of magnitude is, yet again, barely credible. A less costly and more direct method would certainly be revealing: it would suffice to ask Americans whether they have ever received food stamps. While some Americans may prefer to hide such an event, this bias of omission will never be as large as that of the preceding survival analyses. Let's be clear: their method is a machine for producing the outlandish.

[1] The poverty threshold adopted here is 1.5 times the value of the basket of goods needed to meet basic needs.